

Understanding Autism, Extremism and Radicalisation



Practicalities

Trainers:

- **DPA**

Timings:

- 9.30am – 1pm
- Breaks

Practicalities:

- Handouts and resources
- Questions
- Evaluations






Introductions

1. Preferred name
2. Role, location
3. Previous training and/or experience with neurodivergent/autistic people
4. What you are hoping to gain from this training




Learning outcomes 

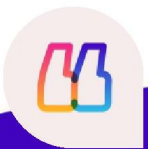

Course aim:
Increase understanding of autism/neurodiversity and associated vulnerabilities in the context of extremism and radicalisation, and develop appropriate supportive strategies.

Learning outcomes:

- Describe experiences of autistic/neurodivergent people.
- Understand autistic differences.
- Understand specific vulnerabilities for autistic people.
- Improve your practice in supporting autistic and neurodivergent people in your setting.

Course outline 

<p>Day 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intro to neurodiversity • What is autism? • The autism spectrum • Areas of difference • Masking • Monotropism • Understanding communication • Theory of mind • Social Imagination & context 	<p>Day 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A need for certainty • Sensory processing differences • An autistic perspective • Differences and vulnerabilities • Mental health • Offending motivation • Risky interests • Autism and extremism: links? • Conclusions & summary
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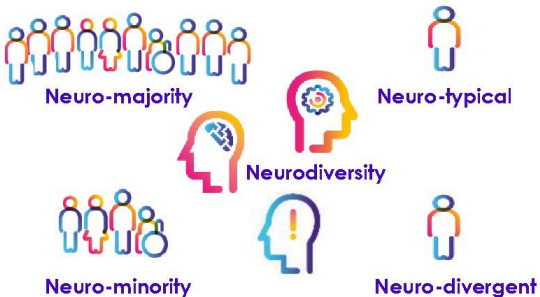
 

Autism and offending

“There is no evidence that autism itself is a causal factor in offending behaviour, but features of the condition may predispose some autistic individuals to have contact with the criminal justice system.”

Woodbury-Smith & Dein, 2014

Neurodiversity



Neuro-majority

Neuro-typical

Neuro-minority

Neuro-divergent

Neurodiversity & the spiky profile

AUTISM

ADHD

DYSLEXIA

DYSCALCULIA

DYSPRAXIA



NEUROTYPICAL

TOURETTE'S

ACQUIRED BRAIN INJURY

"Given the comorbidity of conditions, staff should be encouraged to take a 'whole person' approach to understanding the specific needs of each individual."

Neurodiversity in the criminal justice system: a review of evidence, 2021


Spiky profile

"In a sense, it's an easy job... I think I'm a better quizzer because I'm autistic. I think autism makes it easier for me to remember stuff."


I find things like getting showered, dressed and making my way to the studio quite difficult and stressful. But the place where I know absolutely what I'm doing is on the studio floor."


Anne Hegarty, The Chase

Intersectionality




- Describes how one individual can experience multiple, intersecting layers of inequalities which can result in discrimination and marginalisation.
- Race, ethnicity, gender, class, disability and other marginalised identities can intersect to create a unique experience of inequality.







Neurodivergence in the CJS



“Evidence indicates that at all points of the criminal justice system, people are disadvantaged because of their neurodivergence.”

Exploring the links between neurodiversity and the revolving door of crisis and crime, 2022



What is autism?

How do we talk about autism?



Discussion:

What do you think of when you hear the word *autism*?



What is autism?



Autism is a difference in how someone:

- Communicates with, and relates to, other people.
- Makes sense of the world around them.

Autism:


- Is clinically defined as a developmental disability.
- Is a neurological difference.
- Often co-occurs with other conditions.
- Can be diagnosed at any age.


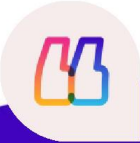
 It is almost impossible to put an accurate figure on how many autistic people there actually are.

The autism spectrum



- Previously regarded as a continuum but this did not take into account a person's strengths or challenges.
- Every autistic person has their own unique experience.
- Language is important.



Autism and diagnosis

"Many of today's autistic adults were undiagnosed autistic children and did not get the support and self-knowledge that comes with diagnosis until later in life."

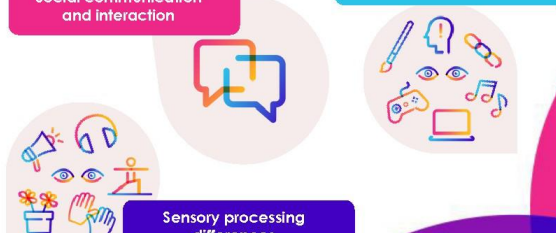
Janine Booth, *Autism Equality in the Workplace*, 2016




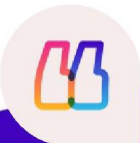
Areas of difference

Social communication and interaction

Need for certainty, structure, routines and interests




Sensory processing differences

Defining autism

"'Mild autism' doesn't mean one experiences autism mildly... It means YOU experience their autism mildly. You may not know how hard they've had to work to get to the level they are."



Adam Walton



Masking

- Masking or camouflaging is common in some autistic people.
- Not obvious someone is autistic.
- Observe and analyse the behaviour of others.
- Mirror/imitate others in order to fit in, be accepted or mask social confusion.
- Capabilities misunderstood.
- Can be incredibly damaging to mental health.

- Quick to agree; acquiescing
- Watching, copying body language
- Talking a lot rapidly/silent/hesitant
- Repeating phrases, words
- Nervous, fidgety, hypervigilant



Masking

"I'd become good at building rapport and adapting to different circumstances and social groups.

But I knew doing so was going to be exhausting. Honestly, I didn't want to expend the energy of having to put up some façade or other every day.

I'd been living a chameleon life for years; seeking affirmation from some, ingratiating myself with others. I did it because I had to."

Jacob Dunne, Right from Wrong

Autism + Environment = Outcome

"The physical and social environments we live in are not designed with autistic people's strengths and needs in mind.

This means that it is often the environment that disables an autistic person, rather than their autism itself."


Dr Luke Beardon

Monotropism




- Monotropic minds tend to have their attention pulled more strongly towards a **smaller number of interests at any given time**.
- This leaves fewer resources for other processes. Monotropism is characterised by an **intense focus** on an area of interest.
- **Very strong connections** can develop; to interests, topics, objects, people etc. These can be **difficult to break or redirect**.
- **Autistic inertia** refers to the difficulty around getting going with tasks and switching focus once engaged.

Case study: Gary McKinnon



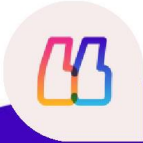

- Believed the US were withholding critical information on UFOs.
- Began hacking into NASA and US Defence Dept IT systems.
- Discovered many systems were insecure or inadequately protected – left messages to alert services.
- Stopped eating, sleeping, washing etc.
- Became suicidal.
- Insists he never acted with malicious intent.
- Described his actions as a 'moral crusade'.





Understanding communication




The Double Empathy Problem

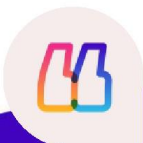

“Simply put, the theory of the double empathy problem suggests that when people with very different experiences of the world interact with one another, they will struggle to empathise with each other. This is likely to be exacerbated through differences in language use and comprehension.”

Dr Damian Milton



Communication differences

<p><u>Potential differences</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literal thinking. • Processing differences; visual thinkers; time. • Tone of voice. • Eye contact. • Facial expressions. • Understanding of neurotypical social expectations i.e. chat chat. • Expressive/receptive abilities. 	<p><u>Potential implications</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Misunderstandings. • Assumptions and judgments. • 'Reading the room'; judging personalities; dynamics. • Making and maintaining relationships. • Social anxiety; self-medicating. • Social isolation; poor mental health. • Frustration, resentment, anger.
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Vulnerability

“Autistic people are increasingly on dealers’ radars because their desire for friendship means they may not recognise the grooming process for what it is.”

Paul McKenna, Youth Leader

“Hidden disabilities and neurodevelopmental differences leave children more at risk of being targeted by criminal gangs, especially if they have been excluded from school. All the young men supported... were excluded from mainstream education.”

Tamsin Gregory, St Giles Trust





Film:
Processing information
TOO MUCH INFORMATION



Adapting our communication

- ✓ Clear, direct, concise language.
- ✓ **Avoid** open questions, vagueness, irony, hinting, rhetoric, sarcasm etc.
- ✓ Offer **alternative** communication methods – **visual** approaches.
- ✓ Offer '**secondary** communication' option.
- ✓ Very **clear non-verbal** communication.
- ✓ Adjust **expectations**; eye contact etc.
- ✓ Allowing **processing time** – 6 second rule.

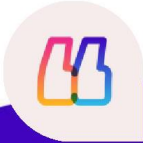





Theory of mind

The ability to understand what other people think, believe, feel...and to predict behaviour on the basis of these thoughts, beliefs and feelings.

- Autistic people may struggle to understand the thoughts, beliefs feelings and intentions of neurotypical people, and vice versa.
- Dr Luke Beardon's '**cross neurological empathy**' concept – similar to the double empathy problem – explains a lack of theory of mind across **all differing neurotypes**.

Theory of mind and double empathy

"It is often said that autistic people have an impaired ability to understand the thoughts and motivations of others (known as 'theory of mind'), yet this is often less of an issue with other like-minded autistic people.

It can also be said that non-autistic people struggle to understand the idiosyncrasies of autistic people too however, causing an 'empathy problem' for both parties."

Dr Damian Milton



Theory of mind

What you might notice:

- **Sharing** information - over, under or without context.
- **Expect** you to know things without giving you information.
- **Difficulty judging** audience for conversations, jokes, banter etc.
- Difficulty **predicting** others' behaviour.
- **Focus** on own interests; may appear disinterested in others.
- **Apparent ambivalence** towards others' point of view.



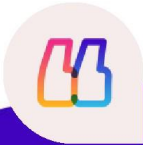

Social imagination & context

- **Assessing** risk and predicting/understanding consequences.
- The person may **continue** to put themselves at **risk**.
- The same behaviour may have different consequences in a different **context**.
- The person may be **vulnerable** to being **coerced** by others; people can be deceptive.
- Wider events may change the way people **view** something.
- **Empathy** may be experienced and presented differently; showing remorse.

Case study: Damon Smith






- Accused of possessing an explosive substance with a view to endangering life; left a rucksack packed with (viable) explosives on the tube.
- Context: this was in 2017 following a number of very significant terrorist attacks.
- Damon was described as 'weapons obsessed'.
- His family described him as 'highly vulnerable'; diagnosed with Asperger syndrome in 2007.
- Damon insists his actions were 'a prank', stating that he intended it to be a smoke bomb and thought it would be funny.

Comment from the judge

"I am influenced by your history of preoccupation with weapons and bombs as well as by your condition which makes it difficult for you... to understand and fully appreciate the very serious potential consequences of your actions."

Vulnerability

"My inability to read between the lines or lie led me to being fined £200.

I am told autistic people in prison regularly fail their parole meetings when asked if they regret what they've done, as they answer honestly, 'No' – whereas allistics (non-autistic people) understand the social rewards that come with lying and saying the 'correct' thing even when they don't mean it."

Fern Brady, Strong Female Character



Day 2


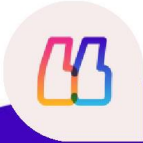


Need for certainty

Need for certainty



- The world can feel like a very unpredictable and **confusing** place.
- **Structure**, rules and routines help make sense of the world.
- **Change** may generate anxiety.
- Well-meant **flexibility** may not be helpful.
- **Activities and interests** may be **intense** and are fundamental to happiness.

Need for certainty

"Reality to an autistic person is a confusing, interacting mass of events, people, places, sounds and sights.

There seem to be no clear boundaries, order or meaning to anything. A large part of my life is spent trying to work out the pattern behind everything.

Set routines, times, particular routes and rituals all help to get order into an unbearably chaotic life. Trying to keep everything the same reduces some of the terrible fear."

Therese Jolliffe



Executive function

Executive functioning is the way our brain processes and manages information and includes:

- Emotional and impulse control
- Flexible thinking
- Working memory
- Self-monitoring
- Decision making; prioritising
- Organisation; planning
- Task initiation; time management






Executive function

Challenges or differences in some - or all - of these executive functioning skills could lead to difficulties with:


- Concept/perception of time
- Personal care
- Starting, and staying on task
- Impulsivity/avoidance
- Procrastination
- Decision making; assessing risk/consequences
- Recall of conversations




Considerations




- May be drawn to organisations - and **people** - which offer clear structure and rules.
- May become **impulsive** or **avoidant** if tasks involve multiple skills and a high degree of **uncertainty**.
- May feel more in control of an area of interest and struggle to **balance** this with everyday life.
- A **spiky profile** is exceptionally common in this area.





Coping strategies



"The constant change of most things never seemed to give me a chance to prepare myself for them. Because of this, I found pleasure and comfort in doing the same things over and over again."

Donna Williams


"I can eat exactly the same meal, for three meals a day, for days and days on end...to avoid having to shop, to avoid having to cook, to avoid having to think."

Sarah Hendrickx




Sensory processing









Sensory processing differences




- Hypo and/or hyper sensitivities.
- A unique experience.
- Not exaggerating or over-reacting.
- Overload can result in distraction, agitation, meltdowns.

Repetitive and self-stimulatory actions - stimming - may be for:

- Enjoyment.
- Interest.
- Blocking unwanted sensory input.
- Meeting a sensory need.
- Self-regulation, self-soothing.

 Sight	 Smell
 Taste	 Hearing
 Touch	 Balance and movement
 Body awareness	 Internal feedback

Film:

TOO MUCH INFORMATION

Warning!
Potentially intrusive visual and audio effects

Supportive strategies



- ✓ Pre-warn; offer advanced information.
- ✓ Remove sensory stressors; low arousal.
- ✓ Autonomy over environment.
- ✓ Quiet areas.
- ✓ Clear, concise information, extra processing time.
- ✓ Allow and enable stimming.
- ✓ Adjust expectations; awareness, empathy and understanding are key.





Lived experience input

An Autistic Perspective

DPA



Differences and vulnerabilities

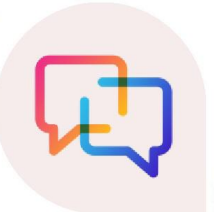


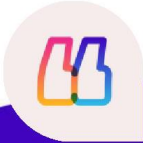

Vulnerability

By law, autistic people are deemed 'vulnerable' individuals.

Discussion:

1. What makes autistic people vulnerable in society generally?
2. What could make autistic people exceptionally vulnerable to coming into contact with the CJS?




Vulnerability

“There is no evidence that autism is a causal factor in offending behaviour, but features of the condition may predispose some autistic individuals to have contact with the criminal justice system.”

Woodbury-Smith & Dein, 2014



Differences and vulnerabilities

Monotropism; hyper-focus	Communication differences; masking	Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria	Need for certainty
Theory of Mind; social imagination; context	Sensory processing differences	Executive function	Interests & playing to strengths
Offending motivation & intention	Bullied; marginalised; isolated	Mental health; trauma; diagnosis	Poorly understood by professionals




Co-occurring conditions

Autistic people are more likely to experience other health-related issues that need consideration:


- Epilepsy.
- Addictions.
- Eating disorders; Anorexia, ARFID.
- Chronic pain; hyper-mobility, Ehlers Danlos.
- Mental health issues; depression, anxiety, OCD, Personality Disorder, trauma.




Mental health 

- Around 80% of autistic adults will experience mental health issues.
- 70% of autistic children have a mental health issue.
- 7-42% of autistic children have self-harmed and/or attempted suicide.
- Premature mortality rates; lower level of life satisfaction.
- Higher risk of addiction.
- Increased likelihood of abuse and trauma.

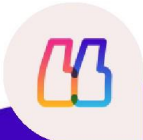
➤ **Suicide rate = 9 x higher**




94% of autistic adults reported experiencing anxiety.



83% reported experiencing depression.



Stress & anxiety 

"Just imagine how you felt when you did something really anxiety provoking, such as your first public speaking engagement.... Now just imagine if you felt that way most of the time for no reason."

Temple Grandin

"Everything new I encounter - even if it is simply the beginning of another week - is seen through the prism of fear."


Laura James

Autistic trauma 

Autistic people may have experienced trauma due to:

- Growing up in a confusing world.
- Interpersonal traumas – bullying, relationship/friendship breakdown.
- Transitions and change – school, home and routine changes; hormonal and physical changes i.e. puberty.
- Sensory experiences being misunderstood or minimised.
- Time spent in institutions.
- Being misunderstood, misdiagnosed and mistreated by healthcare professionals.

Autism & Personality Disorder



Similarities

- Impact on ability to make and maintain relationships.
- Need to have things happening in a particular way.
- Emotional dysregulation.
- Can have complex and traumatic family history.
- Can have additional mental health issues/self-harm.
- May have developed 'maladaptive' strategies to cope.

Differences

- Age of onset of social/interactive/flexibility of thinking issues.
- Possible 'non-problematic quirks' in early life.
- Intense interests.
- Different reasons for rigidity.
- Communication differences.
- Sensory processing differences.
- Likelihood of issues linking to significant trauma.



Autism & Personality Disorder

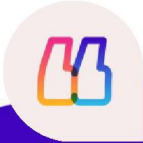



Considerations:

- DANGER - getting too focused on 'telling the difference'.
- POSITIVE - understanding both to help unpick these issues in one person.
- HELPFUL - The Coventry Grid for Adults is helpful in highlighting the differences.

Offending motivation





Offending motivation

"... one thing that really struck me on the training was that we might be misinterpreting people's motivation for offending, and that if, for example it's related to a special interest it might be really difficult for us to move them away from a special interest which links to offending..."

Senior Probation Officer interviewed by NAS for C.J.II report



Motivation and intentions

On the surface, someone's motivation may appear to be clear cut, but this isn't always the case...

Politically motivated..?
"Other people have obsessions that look political, but aren't. So there are people who are obsessed with Nazi uniform and regalia to the extent that they have almost become one, but they are not, as they are not political. Instead they are consumed with collecting information about the Nazis."
Dr Dougal Julian Hare

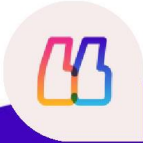

Sexually motivated..?
 A man was admitted to a secure hospital after downloading and sharing huge amounts of indecent images of children. He had been told that you **CAN'T** download these types of images. He was trying to show that it is possible to download. He then became obsessed with collecting the full 'series' and organising them into categories.



Case study: Mohammed Ali

- Convicted of possessing a chemical weapon – ricin – he had bought from an undercover agent on the dark web.
- Told jurors he was just 'curious' and wanted to test the boundaries of the dark web. Stated he was unaware ricin was illegal to possess.
- "I was interested in the dark web and ricin. I just wanted to know what the fuss was about."
- Judge stated: 'I am satisfied that Mohammed Ali had no intention of disposing of ricin immediately. He intended to keep it.'



Vulnerability

“Cybercrime or terrorism also involves more defendants with autism because it is often those people who are on their own, in their rooms on their computers — they get into a chatroom and think people who respond are their friends. They’re more vulnerable and so, may be at risk of being radicalised.”


Clare Allely - The Times article; 'Is prison the right place for autistic offenders?'



Risky interests


When interests have crossed the line into risky, or potentially criminal behaviour:

- May be animated, passionate and **intense** when talking.
- May not be aware of **others' perceptions** or concerns.
- **Motivations** and **intentions** may not be as they appear.
- Explore the **origin** of the interest; focus on strengths in redirecting
- Clear, direct **communication** around risks; explain **why** people are concerned; **factual honesty** around illegality and consequences;
- Use your **autism lens**.



Case study: Michael Pigin

- 17 year old with a longstanding fascination with weaponry and World War II memorabilia.
- Arrested following threatening behaviour with a weapon and found to have video evidence of bomb making.
- Found to possess weaponry and appeared 'obsessed' with stories of mass murder.
- Michael had a long history of bullying and significant mental health issues as a result.
- Evidence of having a fascination with school shootings and being involved with EDL marches. He also appeared to participate in 'hate' activities in relation to Muslims.
- Diagnosed as autistic whilst in custody.

Case study: Michael Piggini 

Michael told the jury he:

- 'Didn't have a problem with Muslims in general' - described a series of racist comments at school as 'banter'.
- Had no intention of carrying out any attacks and tested explosives 'simply for entertainment'.
- Collected air-guns and knives because it was 'cool' - he had no intention of using them.
- Two juries failed to reach a verdict.

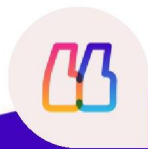

"No one does this without some history of abuse or trauma or some mistreatment... They have got to be aggrieved about something."
Mr Godsi, author of Violence and Society: Making Sense of Madness and Badness

Autism and extremism: links? 

Discussion:

- *Is there a link between autism, extremism and radicalisation?*
- *If so, what is it?*



Autism and terrorism

"There is no evidence supporting the existence of an association of ASD and terrorism in the general population."

Faccini & Allely, 2017; Al-Attar, 2020


Links..?




- What research there is, is sparse and inconclusive.
- Although research indicates there is **no empirical evidence to link autism and terrorism**, however, it is recognised that **there are factors** that can lead to **increased vulnerability and risk**.
- Jonathan Hall KC, Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, spoke in 2021 of the '**staggeringly high**' numbers of autistic people being referred into Prevent.
- The 'usual' approaches and **interventions may not be effective** for autistic people.




Conclusions & summary



Considerations




Characteristics		External factors
Theory of Mind	Need for certainty	Culture/religion /beliefs
Understanding/ perception	Sensory; emotional; mental health	Marginalisation; school exclusion
Communication differences	Internet	Contact with authorities
Intense interests; hyper focus	Social isolation	Lack of peers/tribe

Contextual points 

Findings from a study by Walter, Leonard & Shaw, 2020 and Al-Attar, 2019


- A list of identified facets and features of autism **should not be used** as a checklist for risk assessment of future involvement in offending.
- Instead, they should be seen in the context of the presentation of the individual and their life experience.
- The combination of autism and other psychiatric conditions can increase the complexities of susceptibility.

THE NEED FOR AN INDIVIDUALISED APPROACH CANNOT BE EMPHASISED ENOUGH.

Contextual points 

Autistic people can, and do:

- Make unwise choices in the same way that all individuals can.
- Experience the same push and pull factors that result in other people being vulnerable to risky thinking and behaviour.
- Have specific vulnerabilities that may impact on risk of offending and success of rehabilitation.
- Be poorly understood at all levels of prevention and rehabilitation.

Challenges 

- Desire for friendships/relationships without safe alternatives.
- Not recognising own vulnerability/unwilling to see it.
- Not seeing and predicting risk and consequences.
- The internet can be a blessing and a curse; echo chambers; algorithms; theory of mind etc.
- Wanting to be like everyone else, but not necessarily recognising context.
- Stigma around labels.

Playing to strengths 

- ✓ Channelling interests in a positive way; incorporating them into interventions – helping individuals see how their strengths can be used positively for wellbeing.
- ✓ Seeking out groups around interests, neurodiversity or both.
- ✓ Exploring and celebrating positive neurodivergent role models.
- ✓ Ensuring the individual has the opportunity to explore their own autistic identity; link this to strengths.
- ✓ Create a positive, inclusive culture where difference is accepted and celebrated.

Adaptations 


There are some clear guidelines available in terms of assessing risk, protective factors, interviewing and conceptualising autistic offenders.

FARAS - Framework for the Assessment of Risk and protection of offenders on the Autism Spectrum (developed by *Dr Zainab Al-Aitar*)

Adaptations fall into different groups:

- Improving communication and understanding
- Playing to strengths
- Making connections



Supportive strategies 

Get to know the person:

- ✓ Find out key information before meeting the person.
- ✓ Engage with the person; interests etc.
- ✓ Begin to understand their personality.
- ✓ What has happened to them prior to you meeting them?
- ✓ How have they reacted to those events?
- ✓ Speak to family members and professionals who know them – share information.
- ✓ Read notes thoroughly and pass on learning.

Summary



- ✓ There are no quick fixes – this is **complex**.
- ✓ **Training, knowledge, empathy** and **understanding** are key.
- ✓ Think about **communication** style, literal understanding, **processing** time and offer alternative options.
- ✓ Consider the specific challenges and the impact - **trauma** - of interventions/prison/probation in terms of communication, environment, rules, change and transition etc.
- ✓ Be mindful of **theory of mind** differences and implications of this.
- ✓ Consider the positive and negative effect of certain **interests**; can they be incorporated into support?
- ✓ Be aware of **anxiety, co-occurring conditions** and the impact of the **sensory environment**.
- ✓ Engage with other agencies, and **share information**.
- ✓ **Try to see things through an autism lens.**



Thank you!




- Thank you for taking part
- We hope you have found the course useful
- Please complete the evaluation




For more information please visit www.autism.org.uk

Mental health good practice guide



Tips for adapting verbal interactions:

- ✓ Use fewer words.
- ✓ Allow extra processing time.
- ✓ Visual and written information.
- ✓ Break sessions into small goals.
- ✓ Build rapport slowly.
- ✓ Incorporate the person's interests.
- ✓ Adapt the environment – lighting etc.
- ✓ Enable stimming.
- ✓ Break conventions i.e. chairs side-by-side, walking, emailing, virtual engagement.



Further reading

